

Associate Paper

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The United Kingdom Returns to the Indo-Pacific

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Key Points

- The UK's latest defence review re-commits Westminster to the Indo-Pacific.
- Its "tilt" to the region should enhance diplomatic and trade relations between London and its Indo-Pacific partners.
- Prime Minister Boris Johnson is eager to demonstrate to the US that post-Brexit Britain is prepared to defend liberal values across the globe and resist authoritarian behaviour.
- Countering a rising China is a core reason behind the "tilt", but it may see the UK sleepwalk into a war over Taiwan while having insufficient resources to dedicate to European security.
- A British presence in the Indo-Pacific will likely concern China and could further divide the region ideologically and economically.

Summary

The United Kingdom's new defence review, [*Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*](#) (the "Integrated Review"), has seen the UK commit itself to Indo-Pacific security. Westminster will look to enhance its strategic and diplomatic relationship with regional countries and deploy military personnel to uphold and promote a rules-based order. The Integrated Review heralds the UK's return to Indo-Pacific security and will have far-reaching implications for both London and the region.

Analysis

As capabilities and opportunities shift, states become more adventurous in the search for new markets and levers of power. Britain's merchant profiteers of its imperialist era recognised such changes and saw opportunities to grasp in the markets and strategically relevant geography of East Asia. Boris Johnson, Britain's prime minister, seems to echo the adventurism of his imperialist forebears in the Integrated Review, the United Kingdom's most dramatic foreign policy review since the end of the Cold War. In it, Russia is identified as the UK's biggest security concern, being an 'acute threat', and China is labelled a 'strategic competitor'. It identifies the Indo-Pacific as increasingly becoming the globe's main geopolitical centre, and how the UK will be the most engaged European power in the region, militarily and commercially, by 2030.

Although the paper identifies Russia as the UK's main security threat, it is clear that its main thrust is a "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific. HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier, will lead an allied task force into the region in 2021, with the aim of demonstrating the UK's '... ability to project cutting-edge military power in support of NATO and international maritime security.' Close co-operation with the US on regional security is seen as paramount, as is the sustainment of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, enhancing Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore's security framework for the future. The UK's tilt will have an economic nature, as it looks to enhance its trading relationships with the member states of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and seeks accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. The UK is also eager to engage with the major players in the region, a desire evident in the UK's [invitation](#) to Australia, India and South Korea to join the G7 summit in June, and Mr Johnson's pending high-profile [visit to India](#). After a long hiatus, the British are sailing East again.

While a rising China is undoubtedly a major reason behind the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt, post-Brexit Britain finds itself adrift and struggling to find its place in the world. Its "special relationship" with the US is no longer that, and President Biden is much more hostile to the populist Mr Johnson than was his predecessor, Donald Trump. Freed from the excessively bureaucratic and protectionist European Union, the UK is now able to exert itself and pursue its interests with more freedom across the globe, and Mr Johnson is eager to flex his muscles and show the world, particularly the US, that it is "back" and committed to Asian security matters. This signalling seems to satisfy the China hawks and Brexiteers in London alike; the upcoming geopolitical centre of the world, the Indo-Pacific, will be where post-Brexit Britain forges new, and enhances old, relationships with liberal democratic powers and upholds its own values by countering a rising authoritarian communist state.

That view is, however, a romanticisation of the geopolitical reality of the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt. It can be said with confidence that the tilt will enhance UK-US relations, as Washington views China's rise as a major security threat demanding multilateral action from democratic powers. The UK also has a personal interest in the ongoing fate of Hong Kong, a British territory until it was handed back to China in 1997. London's enthusiasm will thus be welcomed and encouraged in Washington.

Perhaps what policymakers and strategists in London underestimate is the primacy of the Taiwan question. A delicate balance has been in place since Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China and the ensuing Joint Communiqués of 1972 and 1979, wherein it was agreed that Taiwan was technically independent but nobody could recognise it as such. On the other hand, Taiwan's reunification with the mainland is intrinsic to Xi Jinping's "China vision", a situation that is at odds with the US commitment to upholding its independence and that is, in the words of Mr Biden, '[rock solid](#)'. A clash appears to be inevitable and UK military personnel in the Indo-Pacific would easily be embroiled in a war over Taiwan, a conflict that would not suit British interests.

The UK's Indo-Pacific tilt will also leave it unable to fully commit to European security, as it will have limited naval assets left to defend against security concerns emanating from Russia in the Arctic Ocean and Baltic Sea. It also seems to be unduly distracting the government from the real desires and needs of the British people. A controversial [policing law](#) recently sparked [protests](#) across the country and an unprecedented [anti-police riot](#) in Bristol, and many Britons are economically struggling due to the dual blows of COVID-19 and Brexit. The government should be focussing on its domestic agenda, not the security concerns of other countries halfway across the globe.

Nonetheless, the UK is now committed to the Indo-Pacific and the US-led vision of a free and open region, and will become an active player in the region's security framework and economic reconstruction post-COVID-19. For the smaller states of Asia wanting to resist China's influence, and the liberal democratic powers assisting them, the UK is a welcome addition. For China and its partners, the UK's presence will be seen as an expansion of the informal US-led "anti-China" alliance and another power attempting to maintain Western, particularly US, hegemony in the region.

Interestingly, the policy paper also outlines the UK's desire to 'engage with China and remain open to Chinese trade and investment' and to co-operate with Beijing in 'tackling transitional challenges, particularly climate change and biodiversity loss.' The UK's declared willingness to co-operate with China despite stark differences in their "values" and political institutions is sensible, and displays an appreciation for a "long view" of history often lacking in Western politics. The Indo-Pacific tilt will, however, undoubtedly hinder that endeavour, as an increased UK military presence will likely be met with contempt in Beijing. Mr Johnson will have to choose between a better relationship with China or with various other Indo-Pacific states. If the events in Westminster on the night of 22 March are any precedent, when it was [voted](#) that trade deals with countries that commit genocide (in the case of the Uighurs, such a labelling is contentious but has been adopted by the Labour party opposition), must undergo parliamentary scrutiny before they are passed, the UK will move further away from China. The Indo-Pacific just got a major new player. It has also become a lot more polarised.

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